

Report of the Commission on Christian Action

The *Book of Church Order* states that “the commission shall inform and advise the church concerning current social issues and the scriptural and Christian principles by which critical evaluation may be exercised on those issues and proper action taken” (Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 2b [2019 edition, pp. 111-112]).

The Commission on Christian Action (CCA) takes seriously its role of calling the church to faithful and persistent witness and action in the world and so exhorts the church to “not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good for all, and especially for those of the family of faith” (Galatians 6:9-11).

Communication from the Commission on Race and Ethnicity (CORE) and the Council for Pacific and Asian American Ministries (CPAAM)

In the fall of 2019, the CCA received a letter from one of the commissioners of CORE regarding the Reformed Church in America’s (RCA) silence in recent years in the face of the concerns of indigenous congregations and tribal communities.

In 2016, when the standoff at Standing Rock Reservation in North and South Dakota took place over the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline, many Christian churches and organizations publicly spoke out in solidarity with the Standing Rock Sioux tribe. Some of these denominations and organizations are listed at www.creationjustice.org/blog/christian-communities-support-standing-rock-sioux-protest-of-dakota-access-pipeline.

They include the RCA’s Formula of Agreement partners and other evangelical and ecumenical groups. To our regret, neither the CCA nor the General Synod of the RCA spoke out in any way at the time.

The concerns of indigenous communities are not limited to Standing Rock, and they continue today. Oil spills have led to continuing fears that the pipeline will affect the safety and health of tribal communities who depend on water that may be contaminated. This has led to litigation. In recent years, U.S. national policy has allowed for development in portions of Grand Staircase-Escalante and Bear’s Ear National Monuments in Utah, which were previously off-limits to mining and drilling. Some of these lands have deep cultural significance for indigenous people. Blasting for the border wall on the Arizona-Mexico border near the Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument crossed into Native American burial grounds. While these are some examples of how public policy affects tribal communities, it is clearly not an exhaustive list.

As the letter from CORE states, “Support for tribal communities in their quest to protect their natural resources, their water and their air, is neither political, nor anti-Christian, nor anti-Biblical. It is important for us as the RCA to show our indigenous siblings that we do support them, we support their right to raise their families in a clean and safe environment and we support their inclusion within the RCA.”

The Commission on Christian Action regrets its silence in these last years when issues of grave concern to Native American communities have surfaced and apologizes for its inaction. We are committed to work with CORE to make sure these concerns remain a priority in our work.

The Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA), through its Office of Race Relations, has made available to the church a process entitled “The Blanket Exercise,” which is described as a “a practical, powerful, experiential way to understand Native peoples’ history in the Canadian and American contexts.” The Blanket Exercise was originally developed by KAIROS (a CRCNA Canada ecumenical partner) for use in Canada and has now been adapted for use in the United States by the CRCNA, Mennonite Central Committee, and KAIROS. Information about the CRCNA’s work with the Blanket Exercise can be found on their website at www.crcna.org/BlanketExercise.

The commission believes that the Blanket Exercise could be a good way for members of congregations, classes, and organizations within the RCA to become sensitized to the history of indigenous communities and their current concerns.

Communication with CPAAM

At the beginning of North America’s experience of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the world began hearing stories of Anti-Asian violence being spurred by a false notion of Asian and Asian Americans’ culpability in spreading the virus. The CCA was honored to work with CORE in writing the statement, “A Call to Stand with Asians and Against Racism” (www.rca.org/a-call-to-stand-with-asians-and-against-racism).

As the pandemic continued, we continued to see acts of violence, hatred, and ignorance affect our Asian American and Pacific Islander siblings. This was highlighted most traumatically in the brutal slaying of eight people in Atlanta in March 2021. Six of the victims were Asian or Asian American women.

Members of CCA met with members of CORE and CPAAM to process the grief and trauma of this violence and ongoing threats. We began working on a revised statement calling for more specific action to be taken by RCA congregations and members in support of our Asian American and Pacific Islander siblings. At the time of this writing, that statement and call for action has not been finalized or published.

In light of this work, we make the following recommendations:

CA 21-1

To join the Commission on Christian Action and acknowledge our failure to speak out about the concerns of our indigenous congregations and tribal communities, and express remorse at this inaction; and further,

To direct the General Synod Council, in consultation with the Commissions on Race and Ethnicity and Christian Action, to advocate for the concerns expressed by the indigenous congregations in the RCA.

CA 21-2

To commend “The Blanket Experience” developed by the CRCNA to classes, congregations, and staff of the RCA as a first step to

understanding the history and concerns of our indigenous congregations and tribal communities.

CA 21-3

To instruct the general secretary, in consultation with the Commission on Race and Ethnicity, the Commission on Christian Action, the Commission on History, and the Commission on Christian Worship, to craft a Liturgy of Lament for use by RCA congregations relating to the specific roles the RCA has played in oppression of Black, Brown, and Indigenous people of North America, from our earliest days on the Lenape land our church forebears called New Amsterdam, to our members' involvement in the transatlantic slave trade, to present day issues of injustice and indifference.

Creation Care and the Climate Crisis

As members of congregations in the RCA, we share a deep love for all of God's creation and prioritize a profound responsibility for it. Made in the image of God, we are called to continue what God is already doing for the earth (Psalm 104), enabling it to flourish.

God assigns humans to care for the earth as God does, in loving servanthood (Philippians 2:7; Genesis 2:15). Our ecumenical partners have already set strong commitments in their missions to work toward environmental repair and care. The commission believes it is right and just for the RCA to join that commitment. For reference, please see the following resources:

- The Christian Reformed Church Climate Witness Project (justice.crcna.org/about-0)
- Lutherans Restoring Creation (lutheransrestoringcreation.org)
- Presbyterians for Earth Care (presbyearthcare.org)
- United Church of Christ Creation Justice Churches (www.ucc.org/what-we-do/justice-local-church-ministries/justice/faithful-action-ministries/environmental-justice/creation_justice_churches)
- Creation Justice Ministries (*formerly the National Council of Churches Eco-Justice Program*) (www.creationjustice.org)

We frequently witness the evidence of a rapidly changing climate. At the same time, we also witness how the earth's natural beauty, a sign of God's wonderful creativity, is defiled by pollutants and waste, resulting in an ecological crisis. As people of faith, we are called to live in right relationship with creation and to not exhaust it. For theological reference, please view the following video by Katharine Hayhoe, "The Bible doesn't talk about climate change, right?" (www.youtube.com/watch?v=SpjL_otLq6Y).

The present moment is a critical and urgent one, filled with both challenge and opportunity to act as individuals, citizens, leaders, and communities of faith in solidarity with God's good creation and in hope for our shared future. The effects of the warming climate are felt in nearly every corner of the globe. Multiple studies show the agreement of 97 percent or more of actively publishing climate scientists: Climate-warming trends over the past century are extremely likely due to human activities. The Greenland and Antarctic ice sheets have decreased in mass. Global sea levels rose about eight inches in the last century. Taken as a whole, the range of

published evidence indicates that the net damage costs of climate change are likely to be significant and to increase over time. Predictions for the future include a sea level rise of one to four feet by 2100, and the Arctic Ocean is expected to become essentially ice free in summer before mid-century (<https://climate.nasa.gov/scientific-consensus>).

Climate change has and will incrementally worsen the viability of North American farmland. We have already seen an increase in floods, droughts, and new pests and pathogens due to climate change. Across the U.S., reductions to agricultural productivity or sudden losses of crops or livestock will likely have ripple effects, including increased food prices and greater food insecurity (www.ucsusa.org/resources/climate-change-and-agriculture).

Climate change also affects our Global Mission partners. For example, Oman is now considered to have a cyclone season—something it didn't have just a few decades ago, with the country's first cyclone ever recorded in 1977. Models show that there will be an average 1°C to 2°C temperature increase for the entire country by 2040. Kenya has experienced both prolonged droughts and intense flooding every year since 2000, as well as an increase in extreme weather events. The glaciers around Mount Kenya have disappeared, leading to the drying up of rivers and streams. Such changes have already led to harvest losses and food shortages, as well as landslides, soil degradation, and a loss of biodiversity. Fewer cold days and nights are even contributing to the spread of malaria to new areas (www.unccd.int/sites/default/files/relevant-links/2017-06/climatechangekenya2010web.pdf).

Furthermore, the societal disruptions caused by climate change are likely to be, and in many respects already are, some of the most immediate and serious challenges to the church's mission. The median estimate from the International Organization for Migration is that there may be 200 million climate refugees by 2050. From California wildfires to the deep freeze of Texas's energy grid to the increase in severity of dust storms across Africa's Sahara Desert region, God's people cannot wait. The church must begin to take the action our national and international leaders have struggled to take.

In response to this crisis and ONB 19-1 passed by the 2019 General Synod (*MGS 2019*, p. 126), the Commission on Christian Action urges RCA institutions, congregations, and members to take immediate steps in reducing fossil fuel consumption and transitioning to renewable energy, using the following recommendations:

CA 21-4

To direct the GSC to monitor energy use and spending within all GSC-related buildings and vehicles and commit to the use of energy efficiency in all of these.

CA 21-5

To direct the general secretary to

- **Collaborate with our Formula of Agreement church partners in sharing educational and advocacy resources, including the generation of a list of creation care networks used by our ecumenical partners.**
- **Provide regular Faithward content featuring articles about creation justice and best practice testimonials from churches and classes.**

- **Use RCA online channels to list videos and resources teaching the theological justifications for creation justice.**

CA 21-6

To direct the GSC, through its Investment Committee, to require transparency from RCA investment partners as to where all RCA funds, including retirement funds, are invested and to move toward full ESG (environmental, social, and governance) portfolios within an 18-month period.

CA 21-7

To urge congregations and classes to share ideas and resources about actionable ways that they can work toward climate justice, including but not limited to the following:

- **Creating creation care and justice ministry teams that educate and advocate for environmentally sustainable practices in congregations.**
- **Sharing stories about what they are doing to save resources and care for the environment.**
- **Providing information and contacts encouraging the use of solar panels.**
- **Dedicating an annual Sunday service focusing on theological and spiritual practices surrounding creation care.**
- **Seeking energy audits from local and/or state providers, as well as measuring and reporting yearly energy expenses.**
- **Advocating for environment and energy justice by regularly contacting local, state, and federal representatives.**

Repeal of the 2002 War Authorization Act

The Friends Committee on National Legislation (FCNL) is a national, nonpartisan, Quaker organization that lobbies the U.S. Congress for peace, justice, and environmental stewardship. Their work effectively communicates the views of the CCA. We have included a few of their resources below for consideration on this topic. Much of the following report is derived from their work.

Nineteen years have passed since Congress adopted the 2002 Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF) against Iraq, which served as the basis for U.S. military action against the Saddam Hussein regime. Now, there is growing bipartisan support in the U.S. House and Senate to reassert Congress's constitutional war authority and prevent another disastrous Middle East war.

That war was declared officially over in 2011, and the United States withdrew its troops. Current U.S. military operations in Iraq do not rely on the 2002 Iraq War authorization.

At the beginning of last year, former President Trump claimed the 2002 Iraq War authorization as legal authority to assassinate Iranian General Qasem Soleimani and attack other Iranian officials and assets in Iraq. The U.S. Constitution gives Congress the sole authority to declare war. The president may use military force without congressional approval only to defend the

United States against a sudden or imminent attack. The U.S. Congress should debate and vote before the president commits the U.S. military to lethal action and should regularly evaluate and vote on whether to continue ongoing U.S. wars.

The 2002 Iraq War authorization should be repealed with no replacement. The 2002 Iraq War authorization should be repealed because of the following reasons:

- It's a relic of the Iraq War of the past. Repealing the authorization that launched it is an important symbolic step that shows Congress is ready to turn the page and move away from wars of choice.
- It's not relevant. This authorization specified military action only against the Saddam Hussein regime and is meaningless in 2021. It does not authorize current U.S. operations in Iraq.
- It's open to abuse. That it is being used as justification for current actions demonstrates how it can be incorrectly and dangerously misused.

CA 21-8

To urge the general secretary to distribute the above report to classes and congregations across the United States to engage with in study, prayerful discernment, and action, including but not limited to contacting their respective U.S. congresspersons and senators to encourage the repeal of the 2002 Iraq War Powers Authorization.

Civil Discourse

Proper and civil discourse is a concern of many people in our nations. It seems as though citizens, politicians, and even Christians are losing the ability to speak civilly to one another. This has implications for the quality of life in our society.

The debates among the presidential candidates of the United States of America often shift from presenting ideas to personal attacks and insults. Candidates in both the U.S. and Canada at many levels engage in many uncivil interactions. Frequently, political candidates and office holders at all levels use social media to insult their opponents. Is this behavior setting a good example for citizens?

This behavior is not limited to secular leaders. Too often on social media, Christians of every political leaning, from both of our nations, engage in insults also. We have all seen the tweets, Facebook posts, and Instagram posts from Christian friends who, instead of discussing issues, engage in personal attacks of politicians with whom they disagree and even supporters of rival candidates.

Our two nations were established on the right of free speech. We delight in living in such free countries. In many nations of the earth, citizens are incarcerated for voicing their political opinions. We are not interested in living in such societies. Yet, as Christians, while exercising this right, the commission hopes that we are guided by the admonishments of Paul in 1 Corinthians 6:12, "All things are lawful for me,' but not all things are beneficial. 'All things are lawful for me,' but I will not be dominated by anything."

Perhaps, as Christians in North America, we celebrate our free speech rights while overlooking the spiritual admonitions on proper behavior for those of us who profess discipleship of Jesus. As Christians, should we not be role models and leaders in civil discourse? Shall we not be, as Matthew says in chapter five, “light of the world and salt of the earth?” What are we doing, and what can we do to establish civil discourse in the nations where we reside?

We have all witnessed discussions at church assemblies regressing into shouting matches and name-calling, with each side claiming to be the “more righteous,” while kindred in Christ with a different point of view are castigated as “non-Christian.” In such cases, the fruit of the Holy Spirit appears to be absent, or perhaps ignored. Galatians 5:22-26 says, “By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.”

Do we strive to be gentle and self-controlled in church assemblies, and do we require this of others? Do we exercise these attributes in political discourse and require this of our political candidates? We believe God is calling us to hold one another accountable for uncivil behavior and to lead by example in our words and actions.

In an age where our children see people tweeting, speaking, and engaging in other rude activities, we encourage one another to model better and more appropriate behavior so that they are not learning that such behavior is appropriate. We are called to be lights in this world.

Galatians 5:14-15 says this: “For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other” (NIV). It is later in this passage that we receive the fruit of the Spirit and a gentle admonition to engage with one another in right and loving behavior.

In this vein, the Commission on Christian Action has devised the following nine guidelines—based on the fruit of the Spirit revealed in Galatians—to encourage our assemblies and bodies to engage in civil discourse.

1. Show **love** to your fellow delegates. How are your words or silence affecting those around you? Are you creating an environment that is hospitable and allows for differing opinions and the work of the Holy Spirit? Are your words and actions rooted in love and showing respect for those around you?
2. Seek **joy** in the work of this body. We have been called together to do the work of Christ’s church. We should look for opportunities to rejoice in the good work God has done in and through the Reformed Church in America.
3. Act to create **peace** and highlight areas of shared interest. One of the mottos on the RCA crest is “Eendracht Maakt Macht,” which translates to “in unity/concord there is strength.” The church is stronger when we can celebrate the many things we have in common.

4. Practice **patience** and follow proper *Robert's Rules of Order*. Wait for the moderator or president to call on you before speaking. This allows your fellow delegates time to process what each speaker preceding you has said.
5. Our words and actions should reflect **kindness**. Demeaning and belittling comments, including eye rolls, exasperated sighs, or rude remarks are always inappropriate and should be unwelcome on the floor of General Synod and in any space, let alone the church.
6. Assume **good intent** from the others in this body. Seek to understand the intention and content of speakers who are expressing ideas you disagree with. What message are they trying to convey? How might their experiences, which differ from yours, shape their thinking on this? Can we find empathy for their opinion even if we don't agree with it?
7. Show **faithfulness** to God, to one another, and to the church you've been called to serve. Have you brought a personal agenda into this meeting, or have you set it aside to hear the Holy Spirit, to learn with and from your fellow delegates, and to serve the Reformed Church in America faithfully?
8. Be **gentle** with yourself in times of misunderstanding or confusion. Ask clarifying questions; if you're unsure of something happening or being said, someone else will be too.
9. Practice **self-control**. Refrain from speaking over one another or engaging in outbursts of emotion. If side-conversations are necessary, respect those at your table and around you and take the conversation off the plenary floor.

While applauding that the workbook for General Synod delegates does have some general guidelines of behavior, the commission believes that these guidelines are too general and do not go far enough. The Commission on Christian Action makes the following recommendations:

CA 21-9

To commend the guidelines for civil discourse above; and further,

To direct the GSC to add the above guidelines to the Statement of Etiquette for Maintaining Decorum printed annually in the General Synod workbook and to formally read this Statement of Etiquette for Maintaining Decorum at the beginning of every stated session of the General Synod; and further,

To urge the GSC to circulate these guidelines to the classes through stated clerks with the encouragement that they be used in governing discussions at the classis level, as well as in dialogue at the congregational level.

CA 21-10

To urge people in RCA congregations to hold their elected officials of all parties accountable for their speech and to model and encourage civil discourse.

Areas of Continuing Moral Concern

The Commission on Christian Action recommends the following links for pastors, elders, and all Christians who need resources about important issues facing our society.

Immigration and the Crisis at the United States' Southern Border

- <https://worldrelief.org/church-leaders-resources-download/>
- <https://outreachmagazine.com/resources/44693-5-ways-the-church-can-address-the-immigration-crisis.html>

Civil Discourse

- <https://medium.com/tom-thoughts/10-rules-for-civil-egoless-political-discourse-c4dda1010335>
- <https://brokendoorministries.com/4th-day-letters/civil-discourse-is-it-possible-for-christians>
- <https://sentinel.christianscience.com/issues/2019/10/121-41/keeping-civil-discourse-civil>

Climate Change

- www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2019/03/190311145852.htm
- <https://operationnoah.org>
- www.christianitytoday.com/ct/topics/g/global-warming-and-climate-change

Drone Warfare

- www.interfaithdronenetwork.org
- www.christiancentury.org/category/keywords/drone-warfare
- www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2011/august/vg_killremotecontrol.html

Opioid Crisis

- <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/the-opioid-crisis-practical-toolkit.pdf>
- <https://relevantmagazine.com/current/the-opioid-crisis-is-the-life-issue-christians-must-address>
- <https://americanaddictioncenters.org/rehab-guide/Christian>

With this report, the commission acknowledges and thanks Jane Brown and Sophie Mathonnet-VanderWell, who completed their terms of service on CCA in 2020, and Beth Carroll, who served with us until 2021. The commission also wishes to honor the deep commitment to justice of the late CCA commissioner E.J. Emerson, who died in August 2020. Her voice and compassion are deeply missed.